



TUCKAHOE

An old Virginia mansion which dates far back even to Colonial times.

## CHAPTER IX.

## THE LABOR SYSTEM OF COLONIAL VIRGINIA.

The intelligence of the first Virginians was such as to enable them to understand that larger returns might be had from a wise use of the brain than from the employment of the hand only. Their ambitions were larger than could be satisfied with the product of their own hands. They discovered very soon that in the cultivation of tobacco there was a large place for wise superintendence. Not that the first Virginians were indisposed to labor, for they had already given proof of their willingness to perform hard labor and to endure severe toil in the building up of the colony. It was simply a question as to what methods would produce the largest results. It seemed to them that instead of cultivating tobacco in such insignificant patches as only one hand could care for, that much larger returns would come from the cultivation of such areas as would require many hands under wise direction.

The forms of labor in the Virginia Colony really distinguished it from the northern colonies. This form of service grew out of the necessities of the case. In the cultivation of tobacco a cheap form of labor was required, and the rapidity with which the cultivation of tobacco spread, made an unusually hasty and urgent demand on the labor market. It was necessary, if the supply of tobacco should keep pace with the rapidly increasing demand for it, that large areas of land should be brought under cultivation, and to do this much new land had to be cleared and many hands had to be therefore employed. This condition will explain the rapid development and establishment of the form of labor employed in the Virginia Colony. At first only white labor was employed, with here and there an Indian who had been indentured by his parents. It was not until 1619 that there was even a beginning in the employment of negro labor. The increase of this class was very slow for many years.

The system of labor known as the "indenture system" was the method employed. Under such an arrangement the laborer either sold himself or was sold to a master under such agreements that were mutually acceptable, and under such conditions as were clearly understood.

Of the white labor there were two sorts, voluntary and

involuntary. There was a class of laborers who entered of their own accord into this arrangement of indenture. They were people who were anxious to come to Virginia but who were unable to bear the expense of coming, and who were unable to adequately equip themselves for any productive work in the colony. So in order to be in a position to come to the colony, they selected for a term of years to become the servants of some masters with whom a satisfactory contract could be made. Many of these were thoroughly good people, and after the term of indenture expired took an honorable and useful place in the community, none the less respected and esteemed because of their term of indenture.

The involuntary class was composed of people who, for one reason or another, were forced into service against their wishes. There were those who were kidnapped by agents or masters of vessels and brought to the colony. These were usually taken from the streets of the larger cities, more especially from London and Bristol. The larger part of the kidnapped class were boys and girls who had not arrived at the age of maturity. It is easy to see that there might be very great extremes in the character of these people. Children of the better stock might easily have been kidnapped as well as those of the worse kind. At any rate, it is known that from this class there came to prominence and usefulness some worthy persons.

Among the involuntary class can also be placed the criminals who were exported from England to the colony. These themselves are to be sub-divided into two plainly distinct classes. There was one class of the flagrantly criminal coming from the lowest conditions of society. These had been guilty of every possible crime, and were exported to the colonies to be sold into slavery, thus ridding the old country of a bad class of people and saving expenses incident to the enforcement of penalties. Although there was an exceedingly great necessity for labor, it was early discovered that such additions to the colony were of no real advantage, but rather introduced an element of danger that had been successfully avoided up to this time.

Of the class of criminals there were many whose offenses had been comparatively light, the penalty for their wrongdoing being all out of proportion in severity to the crime committed. For instance, for a woman to steal a piece of meat